

December 3, 2009 - Call Murtha a Skeptic about Afghan Policy

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After meeting with Obama, he
is still 'not convinced'

By Daniel Malloy, Post-Gazette Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON -- After President Barack Obama laid out his new strategic plans for the war in Afghanistan in a meeting Tuesday afternoon with congressional leaders, Pennsylvania's Rep. John Murtha approached the president's chief of staff.

"He was real good," Mr. Murtha, , D-Johnstown, told Rahm Emanuel. "But he didn't convince me."

"You've got to be with us," Mr. Obama's top aide responded.

"Maybe we will be with you, but I'm still not convinced," Mr. Murtha replied.

The 19-term congressman's support is critical because he chairs the defense appropriations subcommittee, which holds the purse strings for the war effort. Mr. Murtha addressed reporters yesterday in advance of a hearing next week at which Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the U.S. Ambassador to Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, will testify about the plan and seek, what the chairman expects, will become a \$40 billion supplemental funding bill.

In his globally broadcast speech Tuesday night to Army cadets at West Point, N.Y., Mr. Obama outlined a plan for a 30,000-troop "surge" early next year, followed by an expected start to a U.S. pullout in the summer of 2011, if conditions improve and the Afghan government is ready to take the reins.

Mr. Murtha said he was not convinced that Afghanistan is vital terrain in the war on terror, as the al-Qaida network can amass anywhere to plot attacks against America. Also, he said that, in his view, the administration had not defined clear goals for the troop increase or how to achieve them.

"The guidelines from the Defense Department are so convoluted," Mr. Murtha said, "I don't understand what the hell they're saying."

"To me, it's simple: How's the Afghan army doing? What's the electricity production? Have you changed some of the poppy fields from poppy to agriculture?"

"I get a fairly optimistic position from the people on the ground. They say, 'We can do this.' And maybe they can. But before we start funding, I want to see -- I want to convince myself and the subcommittee that we really have something we can achieve."

Mr. Murtha visited Kuwait and Afghanistan over the Thanksgiving recess with a bipartisan delegation that included fellow Pennsylvania Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper, D-Erie, and he returned with confidence in the military leadership's goals to concentrate on winning over Afghans on the

ground and avoid excessive force.

But Mr. Murtha is concerned about the rampant corruption in Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government and the rapidly increasing war cost. He compared the economic toll of Afghanistan and Iraq with the Vietnam war, in which he served, when sharp inflation hit after the United States pulled out. The congressman repeatedly cited the nation's massive debt and his votes against former President George W. Bush's tax cuts because of his concerns about the debt.

Mr. Murtha is co-sponsor of a bill that would require income tax increases -- with military families exempted -- to cover the costs of the war effort, with the idea that the vast majority of the U.S. citizenry has so far made no sacrifice to fight the war.

In his speech, Mr. Obama pledged to work with Congress to find a way to pay for the war. The surtax, Mr. Murtha conceded, is not the likely result. "That's probably not going to be the way it's done, if anything is done at all," he said.

Though the White House wants funding for the troop increase included in the 2010 defense appropriations bill, Mr. Murtha said he and the Appropriations Committee chairmen in both chambers -- Rep. David Obey, D-Wis., and Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii -- agree that the funding should be tackled separately. Mr. Murtha envisioned a drawn-out process that could last until spring before funds are allocated.

Among other things, Mr. Murtha wants a full accounting of how much of the money -- which the White House estimates at \$30 billion, and Mr. Murtha sees as likely to end up closer to \$40 billion -- will be going to private contractors, who are more expensive than direct hires.

He said Congress could attach benchmarks to the allocation, requiring the military to show progress in building Afghan security forces and civic institutions. Mr. Murtha said a deliberate process is necessary, but he doesn't envision the president losing a funding fight this year.

A further complication for the defense appropriations subcommittee's work on a supplemental spending bill is an ongoing investigation into Mr. Murtha and other subcommittee members. The House ethics committee is examining whether they illegally handed out lucrative earmarks in exchange for campaign donations.

Mr. Obama's strategy is being compared with the surge in Iraq, but Mr. Murtha chose a different comparison for this decade's other Middle Eastern conflict. He spoke yesterday about the agonizing choice he faced over the 2002 authorization for the use of force in Iraq. Even though he thought the administration's evidence then was suspect, Mr. Murtha said he voted for the measure because he thought Mr. Bush deserved some leeway.

His tolerance for the executive branch is much less now. "I want to be convinced this time," Mr. Murtha said, "before we go forward."